

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

911
D+P

FROM: RWJ

DATE: July 28, 1959

TO:

JM		
CG		
JPH		
RHN		
CBF		CRB
BRC		

COMMENTS:

MAY 28 1963

SUBJECT: History and Africa

When I first became concerned with Africa and began to ask about the study of its history, almost immediately I came upon the question of protohistory and the methods required to deal with the non-documentary materials it involved. I was told by European and African alike that such history as there was concerning Africa dealt almost exclusively with European penetration of Africa from the fifteenth century onward and that it was written as part of the history of European colonial expansion and not of Africa as such. Of the period preceding the coming of the Europeans there was very little known, but since civilizations of varying size, power, and sophistication had existed in Africa for 2000 years or more, some effort would have to be made to recreate their history as a natural backdrop to more recent events. Because little writing existed in Africa before the Europeans few written records could be found, but there was the highly developed oral tradition available as an archive and there were the archeological remains.

The more I looked into the matter the less certain I became of the necessity of recreating this early history in any systematic way. There was, first

of all, considerable controversy among scholars over the reliability of anthropological and archeological evidence. Second, there was question as to how far back into the past history could be accurately reconstructed on the basis of this evidence. Third, and most important, there was my own growing doubt that any exhaustive recreation of remote eras was worth the effort and expense it would entail. I came to feel, therefore, that historical studies on Africa might be most fruitful were they to begin with major issues and movements in the contemporary scene which could be better understood through historical analysis. Once these issues were identified, it would develop from the ensuing research how far back the historian had to probe, what sorts of evidence he required, and how reliable it was.

Actually, when one thinks of major contemporary questions and African history, one is drawn not toward the period before Africa was discovered but to the period since. I suppose nothing is more characteristic of present-day Africa and its problems than the fact that it has become very much a part of the world community, and its problems are essentially those of adjustment to this new relationship. African relations with Europe, with the Middle East, with Asia - whatever they have been in the past - are bound to become fuller and more complex in the future. If the present is regarded as the end product of a society's past, then something learned about past contacts with the rest of the world might tell the African how he got where he is today and, hopefully, where he is going tomorrow.

Historical exploration of links with the outside world would of course have to vary according to geographic area. In West Africa where European contact goes back 500 years what has been studied of the history of economic, political and

cultural penetration has been done largely by Europeans from the point of view of European colonial history. A look at this development by the African himself, from the inside out, is needed to put events in better perspective for emergent West African nations and to forestall nationalistic mythologies already beginning. Probably a good deal of oral tradition evidence and some archeological materials will have to be studied in order that this story may be told, but there is considerable archival material as well to contribute toward a full picture. This type of history is already being attempted by Africans - whose job it essentially is - witness the Benin and Yoruba historical research schemes in Nigeria, the interest of the universities in African studies, and the beginning of individual research in and out of the universities. On behalf of this development we are following several promising projects and individuals for eventual assistance through fellowships and other aid.

The Middle East provides another African contact with the outside world which is especially important in West Africa. We are now beginning to understand and to measure the extent and importance of Islam in the shaping of the Sahara area for 1000-1200 years and of the coastal region more recently. The history of this influence has not yet been widely studied, but a start is being made. At the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, systematic research and training is planned and the RF has been asked to assist in this development. Already we are supporting one individual study through McGill University, and others may be looked for within the next year or two.

One of the most crucial points of European contact occurs in Central and South Africa. Here the shattering force of European colonization is seen today in the confused and often bitter racial differences in these areas. In an effort to find mutual sympathy and understanding, Africans - both white and black - must

come to know better the events which led up to the present difficulties. Some work is already being done toward this end, including an interesting study of the role of the missions in the Rhodesias by an RF grantee. Other promising proposals are to be looked for.

In East Africa similar questions present themselves. The story of European occupation, though recent and well documented, has not been recorded from the African viewpoint. As yet little attention has been directed to the long-standing Muslim influence along the coast, and no effort has been made to study the racial question in Kenya. In this connection, another history which seems to need exploration is that of the colonization from India. So far as I know there is no present interest in Africa in this subject. It must be taken into account, however, in any serious effort to understand the racial problem along Africa's East coast.

A particular variant of East African history is presented by Ethiopia, with its long-standing xenophobia and backwardness, its swelling nationalism, its unique religious development, and its history of contact with Egypt and the Near East. The University College at Addis Ababa serves as a center where research into Ethiopian history can be coordinated and directed. To begin, the College is seeking RF help toward the organization and expansion of existing library and religious materials long scattered and buried.

Some outside influences on Africa are apparent in one form or another throughout the continent and may lend themselves to more general or comparative treatment. For example, a major force in Africa today is nationalism, an idea which was totally imported from Europe. Another is democracy and the peculiar forms it is assuming in independent African nations. A third is the effect of

different types of colonial rule - British, French, Belgian, German, and Portuguese - on the character and growth of African nations. All of these phenomena call for historical examination. What, for example, are the prospects for democracy in light of traditional African ideas and the varying kind of influence they have received from the West - British, French, Portuguese, etc? How has nationalism differed in one area from another as a result of colonial policies?

There are of course aspects of African history not necessarily connected with the history of recent international contact. Some attention will doubtless have to be given to the history of special subjects such as art, music, dance, and architecture. My guess is that relatively little will be suggested in such fields, at least for the immediate future, partly because of scanty materials but more due to growing interest in new and different art forms. Where studies of the past are relevant, however, the museums might serve as effective points of operation.

Another special subject which might merit exploration is the relation of the ancient world to Africa. As far as I know, the Carthaginian and Roman penetration of North Africa did not get far into the desert, and what influence - if any - they had to the South is unknown. There were sea voyages by Greeks and Phoenicians which could conceivably have reached the West African coast, but here again such contacts as there may have been exist only in legend. If JM and RHN find they can make an interesting case for a re-examination of classical antiquity and the Near East, they may wish to explore further connections between the Mediterranean world and Africa. This could come through ancient Egypt and Abyssinia, but it might also arise out of the Roman period in North Africa.

There is at this moment an able young African classicist at the University College in Ghana who is studying this period and whose work might be interesting in this connection.

Finally, there is the whole question of training. Along with a lack of attention to African history there goes a lack of trained practitioners - not only in Africa but everywhere. A great deal needs to be done to assist in building up a supply of competent historians. Major attention should be given to Africa itself through the universities, but help will also be needed for universities in the United States and Europe. By way of illustration, I know of only one historian in the United States with competence in African history, and as yet very few graduate students are being trained for university posts. In England the situation is relatively good, but France has no competent African historian, while the leading historical expert on Africa in Belgium has never set foot on the African continent. Curiously, the situation is potentially best in Africa itself, where substantial numbers of European trained historians will be available in about four or five years. They will be relatively young and inexperienced, however, and will need the sort of opportunities for further study and travel usually associated with our fellowships.